

# Misfire



Diane Wiest and John Cusack in Woody Allen's "Bullets Over Broadway."

WHEN EUROPEAN DIRECTORS were still making interesting films, some misguided critics explained that Americans only recycled old films, while across the Atlantic film makers embraced literature, theater and painting. Of course, they concluded, the foreign product had to be superior. Snobbery triumphant! With the infallible wisdom of hindsight, it soon became clear that the burst of creative activity that exploded and then immediately fizzled in Sweden, Italy, France and, to a lesser extent, in Spain and Germany could not sustain itself by poaching on the territory of the other arts.

The Americans were clearly on the right sound track. The new American movie makers—Spielberg, Lucas, Scorsese, for example—all received their education under a marquee rather than under an ivy-covered tower and did their advanced study in an editing room rather than a library carrel. When they reach into their cultural grab-bag to provide a historic allusion, it is likely that they will come out with Orson Welles rather than Walt Whitman. With delicious irony, it was the French critics of

the 1960's who praised the Americans for their ability to stamp a commonly used film genre, like the Western or the musical, with originality and even genius. What Americans called imitation, the French were calling self-reflection: the genre reflects upon itself as it develops.

Woody Allen's last two ventures build on familiar genres. Is this a personal reworking of cinema history, or is it the last flicker of a fading talent? The use of awkward alliterative titles is not a good sign. "Manhattan Murder Mystery" (1993) was a detective caper with clear roots in the Thin Man series, and his latest **Bullets Over Broadway**, is a zany tribute to the gangsters of the 1930's, like Paul Muni's "Scarface" (Hawks, 1931). Presumption of the audience's familiarity with the genre enables Allen and his co-writer Douglas McGrath to reinvent the style in a comic style.

IN THIS LATEST FILM, Allen continues his cinema of narcissism, even down to the self-justifying line, "The artist creates his own moral universe," later repeat-

ed as "The superior intellect creates his own moral universe." Using his familiar technique, he dissects his own ego and assigns the fragments to different characters. The aspiring playwright Daniel Shayne (John Cusack) and Cheech (Chazz Palmenteri), a hit man for the mob, represent two sides of Woody Allen.

Shayne wants to become another Chekhov and talks to his Greenwich Village friends about artistic integrity, but he discovers compromise as the primrose path to production. To get mob money for the work, he accepts moll-doll Olive Neal (Jennifer Tilly) to play the part of a psychiatrist. Helen Sinclair (Dianne Wiest) has long ago drowned her career in bathtub gin, but she does have name recognition, and by threat or seduction she

can easily persuade Dan to rewrite scenes for her. With Cheech's muscular support, Olive, too, insists on a few "adjustments" to enhance her part. From the first moment artists talk to producers, who are little more than gangsters, Allen concludes, they begin an irreversible series of sell-outs.

Cheech does not sell out as easily as Shayne. As Olive's bodyguard, Cheech sits through the painful rehearsals. The abominable dialogue and improbable situations eventually get to him, and in desperation he begins offering suggestions. It is clear that he is a raw talent, with more experience of life (and its sudden termination) than the N.Y.U. anarchist-playwright who wrote this thing. Cheech soon takes over the rewrite and becomes so heavily invested in the project that he is willing to kill rather than see his work mutilated by amateurs. He does, and then he meets the end of all artists who value their integrity over the wishes of the producers.

For Allen gangland becomes an effective and very funny metaphor for the arts. The traditional gangster of the 1930's

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works his way up in the mob, consolidates his power by eliminating rivals and becomes boss. At the top of the world, he becomes too proud to deal with other mobs, the police or even his own henchmen, and as a result, in the last reel he must die in a spray of tommy-gun fire. Unlike Allen, Cheech failed to learn the lessons of his fathers in film.

**C**ARLO DEPALMA'S COLOR camera and Santo Loquasto's design have provided the dark, brooding look of crime movies of the 1930's and 1940's, as they in turn once tried to recreate the midnight world of 1920's mobsters. As usual, the bouncy music provides ironic comment on the action. When Cheech, for example, takes his clients for a ride to the waterfront, the transaction is accompanied by "Up a Lazy River."

Ensemble acting has always been a virtue in Allen films, and here the cast is uniformly superb. Shayne is the Allen surrogate. He is the striving artist and lover, the little man trying to survive in a hostile universe. John Cusack becomes the familiar "nebbish" character, even down to the stammer and nervous gestures that became part of the Allen screen persona. Dianne Wiest's booze-pickled vocal chords register several octaves lower than Jennifer Tilly's nasal chirping, which leads Cheech to devise a strategy so that he "won't have to listen to her any more." Both are very funny. Chazz Palminteri's face is as craggy as his voice and his morals. He is the perfect contrast to Jim Broadbent's plumpish Warner Purcell, the actor whose appetite for Danish makes him a candidate for the Macy's Thanksgiving parade, and whose appetite for Olive makes him a candidate for a funeral procession.

What about Allen the artist? In this film, at any rate, the Cheech side of him is dead. This is no innovative "Crimes and Misdemeanors" or "Hannah and her Sisters." "Bullets Over Broadway" marks a retreat into the safe and all-too-familiar corridors of the artist's psyche, and it may even provide a response to those critics who, Allen imagines, want him to go back to making funny movies the way he used to. The old neighborhood, unfortunately, has become a bit shabby over the years, nice to visit once in a while for nostalgia's sake, but scarcely a place anyone would want to stay for very long.

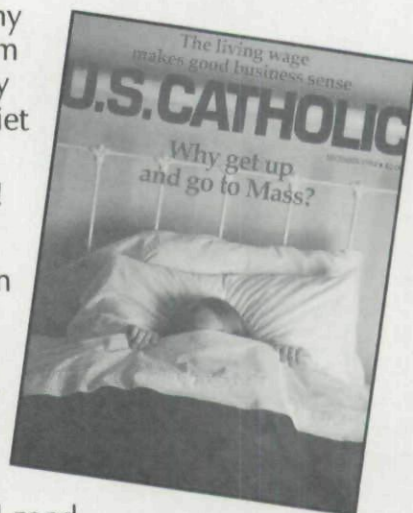
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